



# News Release

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## Unpasteurized cheese could be source of illness, state health officials warn

**OLYMPIA** — State health officials are urging residents not to eat unpasteurized cheese products because they may be contaminated with bacteria such as *Listeria*. Several recent listeriosis cases in our state are a reminder of the importance of buying cheese from approved sources.

The state is asking local health partners to check to see if people diagnosed with listeriosis ate unpasteurized Mexican-style cheese before getting sick, and to collect unapproved cheese for testing. Listeriosis cases in Yakima, King, and Klickitat Counties may be linked to raw cheese. Among the adult illnesses, four were pregnant women; the illnesses were all serious. Listeriosis can be fatal, and some of the women lost their babies. These cases have been among Hispanics.

[Listeriosis](http://www.cdc.gov/nczved/dfbmd/disease_listing/listeriosis_gi.html) ([www.cdc.gov/nczved/dfbmd/disease\\_listing/listeriosis\\_gi.html](http://www.cdc.gov/nczved/dfbmd/disease_listing/listeriosis_gi.html)) is mostly a foodborne infection caused by the bacteria *Listeria monocytogenes*. *Listeria* is often found in soft cheeses, including feta, Brie, Camembert, Roquefort, bleu, and Mexican-style cheeses such as unpasteurized queso fresco and queso Blanco. It's commonly found in raw milk and other ready-to-eat foods — smoked fish, vegetables, salads, and items purchased at store delis. The bacteria may also be found in hot dogs and other processed meats.

Listeriosis infection can cause a range of symptoms. Healthy people may have diarrhea or flu-like illness — fever, headache, muscle aches. It can result in bloodstream infection or meningitis. People with weak immune systems or other health conditions are also at higher risk. Women who are infected during pregnancy may pass it to their babies. This can result in early delivery or stillbirth. Pregnant women and their newborns are 20 times more likely than healthy adults to get a *Listeria* infection.

There are some steps everyone can take to reduce the risk of acquiring a *Listeria* infection:

- Avoid unpasteurized milk or foods made from unpasteurized milk (including cheese).
- Wash raw vegetables thoroughly before eating.
- Thoroughly cook raw food from animal sources, such as beef, pork, or poultry.
- Keep uncooked meats separate from vegetables and cooked or ready-to-eat foods.
- Wash hands, knives, and cutting boards after handling uncooked foods.
- Consume perishable and ready-to-eat foods as soon as possible.

People at higher risk of severe infection, such as pregnant women and persons with weakened immune systems, should also:

- Avoid the following foods:
  - All soft cheeses (including Mexican-style cheeses such as queso Blanco, queso fresco, and Panela, bleu cheeses, Brie, Camembert, and feta) unless they are clearly labeled stating they're made from pasteurized milk.
  - Hot dogs, luncheon meats, or deli meats, unless they are reheated until steaming hot.
  - Refrigerated pâtés or meat spreads. (Canned or shelf-stable pâtés and meat spreads may be eaten).
  - Refrigerated smoked seafood, unless it's in a cooked dish such as a casserole. (Refrigerated smoked seafood, such as salmon, trout, whitefish, cod, tuna, or mackerel, is most often labeled as "nova-style," "lox," "kippered," "smoked," or "jerky," and found in the refrigerator section of grocery stores and delicatessens. Canned or shelf-stable smoked seafood may be eaten).
- Avoid contamination from the fluid inside hot dog or luncheon meat packages to other foods, utensils, and food preparation surfaces.
- Wash hands after handling hot dogs, luncheon meats, and deli meats.

The Department of Health recommends people avoid eating certain foods and practice safe food handling. Information on [food safety](http://www.doh.wa.gov/ehp/food/safetytips.html) (www.doh.wa.gov/ehp/food/safetytips.html) is on the state health department's Web site. Online, there are several other tips on [how to avoid listeriosis](http://www.kingcounty.gov/healthservices/health/communicable/diseases/listeriosis.aspx) (www.kingcounty.gov/healthservices/health/communicable/diseases/listeriosis.aspx).

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